

The Climate Changed Being Alive : Reading *The Future*
***Home of the Living God* Through the Lens of the**
Anthropocene

BA dissertation

Author: Javier Marco Estella

Supervisor: Dr. Laura Gimeno Pahissa

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Grau d'Estudis d'Anglès i Francès

06/2020

CONTENTS

0. Introduction	1
0.1. What is the Anthropocene? The Awakening of the Super-Leviathan	1
2. The Overwhelming Difficulty of Working at a Global Scale	4
2.1. Time and Space in <i>Future Home of the Living God</i> : Advantages of Writing Dystopian Literature	7
3. The Anthropocene as a Trigger to Epigenetic Response	11
3.1. Epigenetic Traces in <i>Future Home of the Living God</i>	14
4. The Last Snow Day: an Eco-fascist Dystopia in <i>Future Home of the Living God</i>	18
4.1. Ecofeminism Activism as a Means to New Models of Society	24
4.2. Is Cedar an Ecofeminist activist? Cooperation and Protection of the Material Bases for Life	27
5. Conclusion	32
5.1. Further Research	34
Works Cited	36

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Laura Gimeno Pahissa for her help, to my family, especially my mother, for motivating me all along the last four years, to my professor in the University of Lille, Thomas Dutoit, who inspired me, and to Marta Valverde López, my pillar.

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* from an ecocritical viewpoint, utilizing the perspective that the knowledge about the problematic emerging from the concept of the Anthropocene gives us, in order to carry out a wider research than that one provided by traditional ecocriticism.

Dilemmas about complex systems of technology, epigenetic changes in living organisms motivated by climate change, and the analysis of the book tied to the concept of an eco-fascist dystopia will be considered from an ecofeminist perspective, whose goal is to find common ground between the difficulties that humanity will have face during this new geological era through the literary analysis of Erdrich's novel.

Key words:

Anthropocene, Erdrich, Climate change, Complex Systems of Technology, Globalization, Epigenesis, Ecofeminism.

0. Introduction

0.1. What is the Anthropocene? The Awakening of the Super-Leviathan

Anthropocentrism has always seemed to be a major feature in literature, some kind of focus that almost never abandons our imaginary, self-centered in a seemingly narcissistic way of representing human-to-human relations as well as human-to-non-human relations, where the subject cannot be understood otherwise but as psychological self, as a departure point for any possible interpretable reality. This point of departure tends to be the common place where writers as well as readers re-present the world they live in, in accordance with their cultural context. Our understanding of these texts and the critique that follows does not seem to be far away from this conception, leading to interpretations of all sorts nearly ceaselessly made from the perspective of human individuality and a supposedly superiority of the intellect. In the vast majority of cases, non-human agency is not taken into consideration as such, many times it is featured as if it did not exist out of the human mind, it is personified, and thus undermined. The mind/physical-world dualism can appear to be a way of representing reality at the base of many inequalities that occur in our modern societies¹, perpetrated by the dominant institutions constituted by a self-conferred power, superiority and legitimacy that remains almost intact still to our days, leading to a delusional understanding of what means to be a human being.

This delusional notion about the human condition may now, however, be at odds with the problematic about increasing global warming of the Earth and its effects. This perspective

¹ Donna Haraway states that “certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals - in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/ made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man.”

urges literary criticism - and a whole lot of other disciplines - to move towards new forms of interpretation and appropriate semiotic able to cope with unexpected circumstances, adjusting to terminology and symbology accounting for the matters that environmental crisis and collapse of the planet's biosphere set out. Hence, reconceptualizing how humanity is understood is crucial, questioning our lifestyles and the impact they have on the material grounds that sustain life.

An interesting attempt to conceptualize how human communities behave was carried out by Thomas Hobbes almost five hundred years ago, who wrote the *Leviathan* (1651), a very influential essay in the field of social and political philosophy. In it, the state, an entity beyond all individuality and which unifies the peoples into a community, a commonwealth, becomes the subject of debate. This unity, according to Hobbes, is composed by many individuals, which unified become a greater and more powerful entity, created to bring protection and maintain a certain order. This new-born entity was given the symbolic name of Leviathan, and its goal would be keeping the human being away from a brutal state of nature, mainly characterized by an arduous competition amongst individuals².

In Hobbes' treaty humans are analyzed from the perspective of an immanent particular nature, where individuals are driven by desire and the perspective of their own welfare, selfishly leaving others in a second position - *homo homini lupus est* - against who they will have to compete. The apparatus of the state is hence in charge of regulating human-to-human relationships, restricting individual free will. This conception dismisses human relationships with its environment, which is ruled by the same laws of survival. However,

² "[The] LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which, the Sovereignty is an Artificiall Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; The Magistrates, and other Officers of Judicature and Execution, artificiall Joynts; Reward and Punishment (by which fastned to the seat of the Sovereignty, every joynt and member is moved to performe his duty) are the Nerves, that do the same in the Body Naturall; The Wealth and Riches of all the particular members, are the Strength; Salus Populi (the Peoples Safety) its Businesse; Counsellors, by whom all things needfull for it to know, are suggested unto it, are the Memory; Equity and Lawes, an artificiall Reason and Will; Concord, Health; Sedition, Sicknesse; and Civill War, Death" (Hobbes, 2019: 10-11).

over the past two decades it has been considered that our being-in-the-world is much more than however we understand our interactions as individuals and our behaviour as societies, cultures or civilizations. The Anthropocene³ is the term we use to describe a geological epoch that the Earth entered a few hundred, maybe even thousands, of years ago - when exactly, is yet to be determined - and which was caused by human activity. During this period, the biosphere has undergone severe and accelerated changes that result in what is known nowadays as climate change⁴.

Picking up Hobbes' idea, Timothy Clark wrote in his *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015) that a new entity has been created under the form of a super-Leviathan, considering humanity as a sum of every state, whose agency is unregulated by self-control or prudence and the impact of which is unprecedented on Earth's biosphere leading to progressive degradation. This entity is not concerned with anything in particular and is a "self-destructive and self-deluding figure, more like a psychopath" (Clark, 2015 : 15), which does not take into consideration how its activity as a unitary super mass may impact the land it occupies.

This paper aims to explore how these circumstances are represented in literature from the perspective of the knowledge that the Anthropocene gives us about the situation that we live in, more particularly from an ecocritical viewpoint whose purpose is to take into consideration the non-human agency depicted in *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), by Louise Erdrich. In order to further this study, genetic factors will be explored as means to showing how the current environmental circumstances could trigger generational DNA alterations occurring within short periods of time from the viewpoint of the epigenetic theory.

³ The term Anthropocene was first coined by the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani in the XIX century. He used it to describe a new geological era affected by human activity. In the year 2000, Nobel Prize winner on chemistry Paul Crutzen considered the Anthropocene to be the new geological era, preceded by the Holocene, characterized by human agency's impact being determining for the switch to take place.

⁴ We know that "is now 95 percent certain that humans are the main cause of current global warming", as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change reveals in its Fifth Assessment Report (Climate Change 2014, Synthesis Report: V).

This approach aims to find a plausible scientific explanation to the outcomes occurring in FHLG. To conclude, this paper will consider ecofeminist criticism hoping to provide with a wider vision in terms of scale, analyzing different examples in Erdrich's story, more specifically those provided by the deeds carried out by its protagonist, Cedar Hawk Songmaker, a 26-year-old pregnant woman with Ojibwe origins. As she usually does, Erdrich chose a Native American to be the protagonist of her story - she herself has Chippewa origins -, a remarkable fact which indirectly contributes to achieving the goal of this paper, for the historical connection between nature and Native American cultures allows to link environmental, geopolitical and social issues.

2. The Overwhelming Difficulty of Working at a Global Scale

The concept of the Anthropocene leads to a wide-open field of questions arising from new forms of complexity. Such complexities find their grounds on diverse issues going from the economic to the political, from the social to the demographical, and from the governmental to the ethical, all of them representing determining factors happening at once and converging in time, spreading around the globe thanks to technology. The Anthropocene is understood as a threshold concept, a cultural idea that finds human agency decisive for the continuous degradation of the ecosystems at a planetary level, considering different stages of history as more influential: the industrial revolution and the burning of fossil fuels, extensive agriculture as a means for reaching welfare, the beginning of globalization back in the 15th century or the 'Great Acceleration', as it is discussed in Ian Angus' *Facing the Anthropocene* (2016)⁵. Unquestionably, these events did improve people's life conditions,

⁵ This is a controversial subject. Ian Angus explains how different proposals to determine the beginning of the Anthropocene have been suggested since the concept became a major discussion amongst geologists around 2016. The possibilities are classified within two groups, "Early and Recent, depending on whether the proposed starting date is in the distant past, or relatively close to the present." (Angus, 2016: 52). Amongst the Early proposals there is, for example, that one which sees large-scale agriculture between five thousand and eight thousand years ago a tipping point, an argument which "argument is attractive to conservatives because it

but these days their achievements are reaching new significations, for their power of ecological destruction is measureless and it keeps on growing through new forms of the so-called progress.

All of the factors listed above make of the Anthropocene a worrying circumstance for which we might not have the tools to deal with. A threshold is a line of separation delimiting two different spaces, these being real or metaphorical, natural or cultural. The Anthropocene as a threshold happens to be all simultaneously, a difficulty hard to overcome in literary criticism, for it lacks the scale prospect that thinking in global terms requires. The unreadability of its probable consequences in the short and long term makes it almost impossible not to speculate. Let us take climate change to exemplify this, for instance. A novel, any kind of story whatsoever, is normally developed in a given space and time, maybe even several, with their particular singularities and complexities. But these spaces will necessarily rely on a predetermined viewpoint chosen by the author, a socio-cultural context. An author will also have a cultural background determined by the sphere he or she lives in at the time of writing. It is certainly very difficult to depict the effects of climate change at a global scale when our perception of reality is represented by the environment we are surrounded with, along with its limitations. Normally, novelists as well as critics will focus on what it is happening within their own spheres or those appealing to a given time and space that they may want to concentrate on. Furthermore, the level of complexity that our actions have acquired through technological advances make it even harder to think in global terms,

minimizes recent changes to the Earth System” (Angus, 2016: 54), and they are said to have been promoted by anti-environmentalist lobbyists. On the other hand, Recent proposals conducted by the Anthropocene Working Group “rejected the Early Anthropocene proposals because they only address one aspect of the case for a new epoch, human impact on terrestrial ecosystems”, adding that the significance about the Anthropocene lies “in the scale, significance, and longevity of change (that happens to be currently human-driven) to the Earth System” (Angus, 2016: 55), even suggesting that the new geological epoch could have really begun during the second half of the twentieth century, with the massive combustion of fossil fuels.

for the most trivial deed can have unthinkable implications in terms of impact on the environment⁶.

According to Timothy Clark, the Anthropocene represents the “era in the planet’s natural history in which humanity becomes a decisive geological and climatological force, [and] it manifests itself to us primarily through the domain of ‘natural’ becoming, as it were, dangerously out of bounds, in extreme or unprecedented weather events, ecosystems becoming simplified or trashed, die-back or collapse” (Clark, 2015: 6). It seems now easy to see why human agency has been progressively damaging for planet Earth to our days. We have reached a point of no return in which our only hope consists in mitigating the effects of climate change, but this should probably not be our only major concern. Humanity understood as a geological and climatological force has strong implications.

Our existence has become motion in mass, a compound individual forces driven by externally created motivations resulting from marketing strategies and global markets behaviour and unsustainable growth, which are at the base of capitalist system. Becoming an individual means to have a fitting identity within that system. And identities are on sale. It is the game of marketing that has, somehow, taken the place of philosophy, for it defines the self and it discusses it, deciding what is to become of it the next season, building brand new epistemologies as long as they suit its purposes.

But this kind of human solipsism, driven by global market rules, paradoxically, makes all identities about the same, creating Clark’s super-Leviathan. Using the term “psychopath” in order to describe this new entity might seem a little too provocative here. However, if we

⁶ Take buying an electric car: it might even be seen as a contribution to the environment, but if we think of the mechanisms that made us buy it as consumers (marketing, globalization, or capitalism), its maintenance (tires, battery waste, energy used to generate motion, how that energy is produced), or even how entire governments can take on the decision to forbid certain car models, not in order to avoid further pollution, but so that the vehicle fleet of the country can be renewed, and automobilistic companies saved from bankrupt, what seemed as a good and environmental-concerned action puts in even more complexity to the equation, leaving it less clear whether it is an appropriate measure to mitigate climate change or not.

acknowledge that, in order to sustain human life as it is - in particular in Western societies -, not only do we contribute to the minorities' exploitation and segregation, not only do we put at stake the future of coming generations that will have to deal with our lifestyles' excesses, but also we admit our societies to be the main agents and the cause of a new mass extinction and the destruction of thousands of ecosystems all around the globe, it might not seem that inaccurate to use such terminology.

Taking all of these factors into consideration is not an easy task for novelists, and neither for any kind of criticism willing to provide with a broader view capable of thinking of all these issues at once, without falling into poor considerations, losing focus, or simply overwhelming readers by the amount of information, discouraging them. Almost always, we will have to admit that it is an impossible task, taking for granted that our approximations will not fit every single case or scenario. However, there are contributions to be made by literature criticism. Understanding what it means to be human in new terms is a first step, opening the possibility for nonhuman agency to play its part on our analysis, rethinking human-to-nonhuman relationships in terms of equality.

2.1. Time and Space in *Future Home of the Living God*: Advantages of Writing Dystopian Literature

Future Home of the Living God takes place in the United States of America, in Minneapolis, most likely some time ahead from our present days. Hence, new not-so-unfamiliar technology is revealed along the story, making the reader think that the action must be taking place in a near future, maybe between 20 to 40 years from now. Although time remains indeterminate, it is definitely linear, except for some moments in the first part of the book where the narration looks backwards in time, contextualizing some aspects of the protagonists' lives. The rest of the narration is written in present tense almost exclusively, in

the form of a chronicle that Cedar is writing for her soon-to-be-born baby. On the other hand, space keeps on moving as the notebook where Cedar writes her chronicle on moves along with her.

The fact that space remains somehow stable does not help this analysis. It is true that the United States could be representative of Western cultures, but it would be naive to take on an analysis of *Future Home of the Living God* based only on the perspective of space, for it would mean leaving aside less favoured communities. The depiction of Native Americans in the novel, however, approaches us to our goal, for they would represent the side of the historically dominated, those whose land has been expropriated and their resources stolen.

Time, on the other hand, can provide a broader perspective for one reason: it allows to imagine the unpredictableness of our behaviours as society in the near future. In that sense, whatever happens in a given space relies almost completely on a certain conception of progress which only time can give us. In other words, time allows us to speculate about the outcomes of the Anthropocene.

Acknowledging that humanity has become some sort of geological force means admitting that this force is also an ‘impersonal one’, as Clark points out⁷. One of the most influential constituents that helped humanity becoming a dangerous threat for life on the planet - including its own - is our concept of progress and technology that has made it possible. Some of the consequences that progress and the evolution of capitalism that goes with it lead to in the novel is the uses that the dominant discourses make of technology. There are some striking examples in the story, such as the use of UPS trucks, for what it implies in terms of complex systems of technology⁸.

⁷ [Humanity as a geological force] does not heed entreaties, respect individual rights or admit of being altered by human decisions. In this case, however, the geological force at issue is, paradoxically, a total effect of innumerable human decisions. Nevertheless, it can seem as imperturbably closed to human direction as is a hurricane or the tilt of the planet’s orbit. (Clark, 2015: 16)

⁸ According to Allenby’s and Sarewitz’s (2011) *The Techno-Human Condition*, the car, for example, can be seen as the type of technology belonging to Level I complex systems. Understood as a means of transport taking

The UPS trucks would be an example of what Allenby and Sarewitz call Level III complex systems. These concern historical, social, cultural, political or economic responses - perhaps all of them at once - to merging Level I and Level II complex systems. Regarding the car, being one of the examples they suggest, it is said:

As for the basis of a technology constellation that fueled a stage of economic evolution in the West, the automobile did far more: it co-evolved with significant changes in environmental and resource systems; with mass-market consumer capitalism; with individual credit; with behavioral and aesthetic subcultures and stereotypes; with oil spills; with opportunities for, an a sense of, extraordinary human freedom, especially for women who were otherwise trapped in their houses by social and economic patterns. We'll call this Level III. (Allenby and Sarewitz, 2011: 63)

Considering the rapid expansion of message delivery companies all around the world and the multinationals they have enabled to appear - Ebay or Amazon being two examples - it seems rather convenient to mention the role that UPS plays in Erdrich's novel. In fact, as we are dealing with space in the book regarded as a difficulty for a broader analysis that could apply to as many territories as possible, the UPS example appears to be an appropriate one, since this company is nowadays working at a global scale, connecting more than 220 countries⁹. But the relevant point about UPS in Erdrich's story is what becomes of it during the pandemic that civilization seems to be undergoing. As pregnant women are giving birth to children who seem not to belong to the current human species, the government starts taking them by force so they can be examined in supposedly specialized facilities. The organization which is used to collect all these women is the UPS, standing for Unborn Protection Society.

individuals from point A to point B, it represents the immediate effectiveness of one of technologies different realities. Another fact about cars would be what Allenby and Sarewitz call 'systemic complexity' and it happens when instead of using cars in order to commute, we use them to transport things or people, but in bigger quantities. These systems depend on transportation systems, government rules or marketing, that is subsystems, making Level II reliability decrease with respect to Level I systems, for all of those elements merging together unpredictable behaviours that have nothing to do with the car itself. The possibility of unintended consequences raises the more variables we add to the equation. As they explain in their book "technologies do not act in isolation; they connect to other technologies, and to social and cultural patterns, institutions, activities, and phenomena that may interact in ways that no one is able to predict" (Allenby and Sarewitz, 2011: 62). The combination resulting from the interactions of different complexity systems multiply the possible outcomes they may produce, sometimes leading to unforeseen effects

⁹ On the north-American UPS website there is the phone number starting by 800 to be found. See <https://www.ups.com/us/en/help-center/contact.page> for more information.

This organization is never explicitly told to be the former UPS company, but it is however hinted that it might actually be the case, although its new purpose is very different from its former one. At one point in the second part of the novel, Sera - Cedar's adoptive mom - and her daughter finally get to talk about what happened to Phil - Cedar's boyfriend - before the latter was taken away. Writing about the Unborn Protection Society Cedar states: "The old UPS trucks haul people there for questioning. They still have the phone number to call on the back of the truck, the 800 number, which is what the neighbour used" (Erdrich 2017: 191). A non-North-American reader might not catch the reference right away, but there are two clues in these two sentences that relate the Unborn Protection Society with the UPS company, aside from the name itself. There is the allusion to the "old trucks", conveying that the vehicles they use either used to belong to something familiar to Cedar or that they have just seen better days. But the reader will be quickly inclined to consolidate the first option, as the number 800 on the back of the truck belongs indistinguishably to the former delivery company.

The UPS company as it is depicted in the story is an example of how unpredictable Level III complex systems can be. In this case, a former delivery company is dismantled by the government and its infrastructure used for the purpose of power and control. Using the company's network allows the government to reach any place in the country in very little time as well as it helps them build a solid and efficient organization. It would not be difficult to imagine such an organization to work at a global scale, given the technology we have achieved in our days. But in terms of time in the novel, it would be a plausible situation to find governments that, due to their incapacity to deal with future economic, social and environmental crisis and planetary collapse, would make use of pre-existing infrastructures and networks to preserve their control over the population. Certainly, the fact that Erdrich chose to write her story in the first person of the singular and mostly in present tense

reinforces this idea, and it makes the reader feel the proximity to the dystopia she carefully describes during the book by appealing to familiar elements.

3. The Anthropocene as a Trigger to Epigenetic Response

The current outlook that a phenomenon such as the Anthropocene suggests is worrisome in many different aspects. In the present day, the overwhelming complexity arising from its effects resulting in extreme weather events such as droughts and desertification, floods and the degradation of agriculture and food supply, severely violent storms and hurricanes, the acidification of the oceans, heat and cold events in unprepared geographical zones, massive animal migrations - and human - and the extinction of species, all of these elements progressively happening at once set up new challenging scenarios for life to be held on the planet as we know it.

We are approaching times of unprecedented changes for humankind and life on Earth. However, as Timothy Clark puts it in *Ecocriticism on the Edge* “the Anthropocene itself, and its alarming future scenarios, is never visible in any immediate sense” (Clark, 2015: 140). This is no arbitrary statement, we are already witnessing the precursor to some of those future scenarios that Clark speculates about, the results of which can be as catastrophic as difficult to predict. In this sense, the effects of the Anthropocene are analogous to those of using Level III complex systems of technology - they go hand in hand -, and they seem both to come from unregulated and constant growth created by economic standards that deliberately choose to ignore the consequences of their prospects against a more sustainable model¹⁰.

¹⁰ There will presumably be a need for adaptation for humanity if carbon dioxide emissions do not decrease drastically within the next decade. Filling the atmosphere with high levels of CO₂ has its costs: almost a quarter of this emissions are absorbed by the oceans making them more acidic, for instance. Another quarter of CO₂ emissions is absorbed by the land, mostly trees, which breath in these gases during spring and summer and release them in fall, as their leaves decompose. However, as entire woods are being chopped down for energy, land and other material resources, as it is happening with the Amazon rainforest, less CO₂ can be absorbed. Over the past five decades the Amazon has been reduced by 17% of its total, and deforestation has become a serious threat, as PhD student in University of Birmingham Emma Dunne suggests in her article published in the scientific journal *The Conversation*: “The drier climate would have reduced the amount of suitable habitats

A study carried out by Sarda Sahney, Michael J. Benton, and Howard J. Falcon-Lang called “Rainforest collapse triggered Carboniferous tetrapod diversification in Euramerica” (2010) shows how climate change motivates changes in some animals’ behaviour as well as it can be the cause of some other species going extinct. It is thought that towards the end of the Carboniferous about 300 million years ago, the Earth's climate had grown hotter and drier making “effects on amphibians [be] particularly devastating, while amniotes (‘reptiles’) fared better, being ecologically adapted to the drier conditions that followed” (Sahney, Benton, Falcon-Lang, 2010: 1079). Reptiles proved to become more diverse, being able to even change their feeding patterns in order to adapt to their new environment, leading these species to become the predecessors to dinosaurs and the reptiles we can currently find on Earth.

Hence, what the study reveals in relation to *Future Home of the Living God* is the impact the climate can have on life and the ecosystems, and how its effects may derive differently according to each species motivating adaptation or extinction. For those species which adapted to the new circumstances it was most likely not a matter of a short period of time, specially if those changes motivated new evolutionary traits or alterations in their DNAs. Studies on epigenesis show how the latter case, that is changes in DNA behaviour, can appear to happen from generation to generation for the survival of a given species, in order to adapt to unprecedented conditions¹¹. Lawrence V. Harper from the Department of

for amphibian species, which are dependent on wet environments and must return to water to spawn”; and “We now know that the event was crucial in paving the way for amniotes, the group that ultimately gave rise to the dinosaurs and eventually modern reptiles, mammals and birds, to become the dominant group of land vertebrates.” the article reveals how extreme weather events caused severe changes in ecosystems before (<https://theconversation.com/rainforest-collapse-in-prehistoric-times-changed-the-course-of-evolution-91289>). Furthermore, Thomas E. Lovejoy and Carlos Nobre hypothesize that “negative synergies between deforestation, climate change, and widespread use of fire indicate a tipping point for the Amazon system to flip to non-forest ecosystems in eastern, southern and central Amazonia at 20-25% deforestation.” They have also noticed that the Amazonian rainforest has a big impact on the weather, making it wetter and that if reducing the forest continued as it has “southern and eastern Amazonia would experience diminished rainfall and a lengthier dry season, predicting a shift to savanna vegetation to the east” changing drastically its ecosystems and forcing species to migrate or even driving them to extinction. See the following online article for more information: <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/2/eaat2340>

¹¹ Genetics Home Reference, a website from the National Library of Medicine, which is part of the National Institutes of Health, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, posts some general information about epigenesis stating that “DNA modifications that do not change the DNA sequence can affect

Human Ecology in the University of California wrote in his article “Pathways by which the Interplay of Organismic and Environmental Factors Lead to Phenotypic Variation within and across Generations” (2013) published in the scientific journal *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, how DNA alterations may result as a response to environmental causes. According to Harper “anticipatory adjustments to possible environmental exigencies are likely to occur [at the level of phenotypic variation] when such conditions recur regularly, but intermittently across generations and endure for substantial periods of time, and when adjusting to them after the fact is likely to be biologically costly, even life-threatening” (Harper, 2013: 325). As we have seen, climate change can entail a life-threatening condition for many species, and these may be pushed, under these circumstances, to evolve and endure through a sort of genetical resilience.

What we may wonder from this point is about the possibility of humanity, understood as a geological force, being the trigger to motivate genetic alterations in some species that will be unable to survive in whatever becomes of the existing ecosystems, were we to continue polluting the environment at the same rates as we have been doing¹². Considering Harper’s words:

Each life form impacts its environment to some degree so that the evolutionary process is dynamic and might be conceptualized as a spiral in time wherein, for a given genotype, phenotypes are induced in response to external conditions, and these

gene activity. Chemical compounds that are added to single genes can regulate their activity; these modifications are known as epigenetic changes. The epigenome comprises all of the chemical compounds that have been added to the entirety of one’s DNA (genome) as a way to regulate the activity (expression) of all the genes within the genome”. These chemicals would perform as switches that can be activated thanks to “environmental influences, such as a person’s diet and exposure to pollutants, can also impact the epigenome”. For more information see: <https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/primer/howgeneswork/epigenome>

¹² If we take into consideration the data shown by the Keeling Curve, a daily record of global atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration (available on the website below), collected by a team of scientists from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego in the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii, situated up top on a dormant volcano, it seems rather clear that CO₂ emissions have never stopped increasing since 1958 when they started gathering data. What this data directly translates into is warmer weather on Earth, as higher levels of greenhouse gases concentrate in the atmosphere and they add an extra layer to the already existing one, which is naturally produced, trapping more heat coming from sunlight, something against which the Earth’s natural mechanism can do less and less about. Keeping track of daily carbon dioxide emissions in streaming is possible on the Scripps Institution of Oceanography website. See the following site to check current emissions and more information: https://scripps.ucsd.edu/programs/keelingcurve/?fbclid=IwAR26fm0646dau4jLgShyic2cOlZd-I0kcqrLy15bj3Bma9RgmG_iTZTF2QY

phenotypes help to shape their offspring's environments that, in turn, exert selective pressures on the genome of the species. (Lerner and Benson, 2013: 351)

This perspective takes us back to thinking of humanity as having become an unstoppable geological threat. From there, we might be driven to speculate about human agency being a plausible cause of any sort of evolutionary modifications that many species would have to undergo in order to survive in a progressively more and more hostile environment. This may well be the case that is depicted in Erdrich's work.

3.1. Epigenetic Traces in *Future Home of the Living God*

The world that is described in Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* does not seem to be full of natural catastrophes at first glance. One can only imagine how the civilization the authoress writes about has turned out to be the way it is. There are many clues to be found regarding environmental issues that may have preceded the world as Erdrich conceives it. These clues are often hidden behind the narrative, and they might be barely caught by the reader, but they appear to have a specific weight on the plot when we take a closer look, specially if we attempt to do so from the perspective of the Anthropocene. They help us better understand the most feasible possibilities to the outcomes which set the grounds for the story, and in a further reading they may also be helpful on the task of identifying the elements that characterize the world that Erdrich describes and how we can engage with it as readers from a critical perspective.

There are two focuses of attention when we consider an analysis of Erdrich's work from an epigenetic point of view influenced by the effects of the Anthropocene. The most obvious one is the problem with babies being born some steps behind the evolutionary scale, which is one of the main themes the plot revolves around. But there is a more subtle one having to do with non-human beings, often implicated with seemingly trivial matters. In one of these instances, we find Cedar writing about Phil's academic projections, as he was willing

to become an ornithologist, but he eventually abandoned that idea for “he had realized that in a few years there would be few birds for him to study” (Erdrich, 2017: 83). As Cedar seems to be informing her future baby about who his father was - we finally know the baby to be a boy -, the authoress is nevertheless hinting the reader about an ecological disaster pointing to the extinction of many species of birds¹³. According to how the society in *Future Home of the Living God* is depicted, most likely a product of current versions of capitalism and globalization and the impact of complex systems of technology on the environment, we have no reason not to believe that an event such as the eradication of animal species could have been caused by human activity, these species belonging to those specimens unable to adapt to the degradation of their ecosystems and climate change.

The new panorama seems to be affecting animal species as it is shown in Cedar’s writings. There are a few references to animals looking much differently from what we would be able to picture on a regular basis. The most remarkable case is probably the moment when Cedar is waiting at home for Phil to arrive before she is captured and, as she is looking at the nature outside her window, more visible to her than to her fellow neighbours, she sees a bird landing on the oak of her garden, although this one is no ordinary bird:

A bird about the size of a hawk [...]. Its tail is very long, and it seems to clutch at the bark and twigs with claws poking from the hinge of its wings. I glimpse its head

¹³ This is not the only occasion in which an element that could easily be interpreted as one more of the contextual pieces of the story which apparently aim to describe circumstances that may be superficially taken by the reader, finally appear to conform a pretty complex scheme which, all in all, makes a remarkable contribution to the dystopian atmosphere. These circumstances can also be identified in the novel through some passages where nature can be seen as behaving oddly, as for example when Cedar has been caught by the UPS and taken to the facility where they are supposed to help women deliver their babies. Through her room window she notices that there is something weird going on about the trees “glowing in fall colors all along the river. Russet, hot, yellow, pink, orange, and deep bloody red. The thing is, I don’t think the leaves had changed yet when I was captured” (Erdrich, 2017: 125). According to her journal, it is September 27th, and it seems that what she sees from her window would be an advanced autumn-like landscape, suggesting that seasons do no longer last the same or that their patterns have changed. If we also take into account Cedar’s words by the beginning of the story about the hot weather - “This is an unusually cool day for August, which means it is only ninety degrees (32°C)” (Erdrich, 2017: 32) we might presuppose September to be nearly as hot as its predecessor, which could explain why Cedar was able to see warm colors on the trees, which stress out under too warm temperatures according to Maduraimuthu Djanaguiraman and Vara Prasad from the Department of Agronomy in Kansas State University, who state about them: “high temperature stress decreases leaf chlorophyll content. The loss of chlorophyll during high temperature stress resulted in change in the chlorophyll [...] due to premature leaf senescence (Djanguiraman and Prasad, 2013: 204), which translates into leaf discoloration.

beakless, featherless, lizardlike, rosy red. The feathers are a slate blue with black tips. The bird, or whatever it is, seems to be eating both fruit and the insects that would be hovering around the tree and crawling on its bark. A graceful thing with fluid, darting movements, it behaves exactly like a lizard-bird. (Erdrich 2017: 92)

Apparently the creature has features from both of a bird and a lizard, which is, at the very least interesting. We know reptiles to be descendants of dinosaurs as well as amniotes, the type of creature that had already made it through climate change before, about 300 million years ago. Birds are curiously dinosaurs descendants as well. Cedar's encounter is an odd and an unprecedented one so far as we know up to that point, but it makes sense from an evolutionary point of view. As climate becomes hotter, ecosystems become drier and food is much more difficult to find for reptilian species. These regulate their body temperature in accordance with their environment, being able to resist hot temperatures thanks to their scale covered skin. Also, in comparison to birds, reptiles are carnivores and do not require from big amounts of energy to digest, for their metabolism allows them to rationalize what they eat for days, whereas birds usually feed from nectar, fruit, seeds, carrion or little animals like insects. Birds' diet could be a challenge in an environment where vegetal life is threatened, as well as it could be difficult to spot preys for reptiles if there are less animals to chase.

The combination of both species seems practical. Beaks do not allow birds to chew, so developing a jaw appears as an advantage since the amount of alimentary resources may decrease for regular birds due to climate change, allowing them to eat bigger prey. On the other hand, the territory a reptile can cover is limited, making it harder to find preys as well, so it would seem rather convenient for them to be able to fly from one place to another, taking advantage of bird's super-developed sight. The animal that Cedar spots looks as though it were the type of creature resulting from the characteristics of a progressively more aggressive environment to which its predecessors needed adaptation. The epigenetic process, although it cannot alter the genetic sequence, does influence the creation of proteins that may modify the way genes behave leading to phenotypic changes, that is physical changes. The lack or

the production of a given protein by certain cells can help these processes to be activated which can be caused by changes in alimentation¹⁴.

Even though it is speculated in the book that scientists might be behind the apparition of new species as apparently Cedar has not been the only one to spot one of them and the word is on the street that there may be others, the fact that humans also seem to be undergoing alterations of a similar kind than animals, in this case, a regression to a former state of human individual, leaves an open door for the Anthropocene to have triggered modifications also in humans at a genetic level in the long run. Humanity is being pushed to continue its existence as a different species, we know the new-born babies in the story to be much more agile as it is reported by Tia: “the ones born alive so far are physically more adept. They grab things earlier, walk sooner. They are bigger. Nobody knows about speech” (Erdrich, 2017: 163). It could be said this regression may be the process that humanity needs to go through in order to survive in the new world they have created¹⁵.

It could be said that Erdrich is giving the natural world an agency and a protagonism in her story that may not seem self-evident, but it does appear to play an important role in the novel. In fact, it is independent from human-to-non-human relations, the plot does not necessarily revolve around the interaction between human individuals and the environment in that specific order. That belongs to the past. It is the environment itself which sets the pre-

¹⁴ There are also other cases where animals appear to have undergone some changes. Sometimes they are undoubtedly the product of human experimentation, and the reader may even actually be able to picture their images, for their descriptions can be familiar. There is, for example, the case of chickens looking like “pale iguanas” (Erdrich, 2017: 251) which would look similar to nowadays genetically modified free-feather chickens. But in some other cases, direct human intervention seems questionable, for there is no apparent reason to create new species as the ones described in the book. A good example of this is the huge dragonfly that Cedar spots: “This one is giant: a three-foot wingspan (almost one metre), golden green eyes the size of softballs” (Erdrich, 2017: 258), which appears by the end of the narration as if confirming our suspicions about an environmental mess that the world must be going through. This time, we would argue that human agency has affected this particular species of dragonfly indirectly through the effects of the Anthropocene.

¹⁵ This is somehow reflected by Cedar’s thoughts when she comes to think of the dinosaurs being able to make it for such a long time on Earth, considering human intellect to be a “maladaptation, a wrong turn, an aberration” (Erdrich, 2017: 57). From this point of view, nature cannot be seen as hostile towards human beings, it would be more as if life was just making its way through. Cedar’s thoughts may just be an acknowledgement that the ones at fault and to carry the label of violent toward their environment are humans, not nature.

conditions, in the shape of likely to happen effects from the Anthropocene, for the story to be developed¹⁶.

But perhaps the most evident contribution for an epigenetic perspective to be considered comes from Cedar's when, in Part I, she makes the following statement succeeded by a very revealing question: "folded quietly and knitted in right along with the working DNA there is a shadow self. This won't surprise poets. We carry our genetic doubles, at least in part. What if some of those silenced genes were activated?" (Erdrich, 2017: 107). These "silenced genes" that Erdrich writes about seem to very well fit with our thesis that an epigenetic process must be taking place in the living organisms, specially if we consider the use of the participle "activated", which seems to make reference to a sort of mechanism which cannot function by itself, but which needs an external agent to initialize it, a fact that coincides on how epigenesis works by being motivated by environmental circumstances.

4. The Last Snow Day: an Eco-fascist Dystopia in *Future Home of the Living God*

After reading *Future Home of the Living God* it appears rather easy to classify it within the group of dystopian literature but, in fact, it may not immediately present itself as such to the reader's eye. Erdrich describes a society which has been on the process of becoming totalitarian regime. The story does not look like a dystopia from the beginning, but it soon becomes one. The characters feel misinformed about their own society and the process it is undergoing, which is the same feeling the reader gets thanks to Erdrich's use of narrative, which purposely omits relevant information, revealing it only in small doses and in

¹⁶ In reality, despite of the lack of an understandable language or any direct communication between non-human and human individuals, the natural environment seems to be accompanying Cedar and revealing itself as carrier of a message for her. Her encounter with the bird precedes another one with a cougar in her garden, which seems to be warning her about the natural world gaining territory. The episode with the rats trying to eat Tia's dead baby could be seen as metaphorical in that same sense. Finally, the giant dragonfly by the end of the story appears to be carrying the same word as well. It seems rather ironic that it makes its appearance when Cedar is locked down again, just before the reader gets to know the end of her tragedy.

unexpected ways. As a matter of fact, the way the dystopia is revealed in the book coincides with the way the Anthropocene has presented itself to us, its outcomes being unpredictable and a serious threat for life.

The novel is a rough critique to capitalism and its patriarchal ways of dominance, which are extensive to segregation of class, race and a disregard of the natural environment. Despite the uncertainty the characters show about who or what is in control of power, it is not hard to find elements in the story that link capitalist dynamics to whatever is in charge of the governmental management. In Part I, Cedar offers a pretty close reading to this idea of capitalism dominance and control, when she describes “the central government” as one “which may not exist, which may be one of the supercorporate entities who have hired the contract mercenary armies that have no country but green money” (Erdrich, 2017: 94). This is only a thought, but it may strike the reader for its similarity to contemporary politics, where multinationals are pushing their way into governments in order to obtain fiscal advantages.

In his *The Globalization Paradox* (2011), Dani Rodrik gives us some hints on how global markets impact on democracy leading to undesirable outcomes for the states which are almost forced to play by the multinational rules. For him, there is no easy way to manage the tension between national democracy and global markets, the effects of which can be resolved in three different ways, in what Rodrik calls “The Trilema”: we can “restrict democracy in the interest of minimizing international transaction costs, [...] we can limit globalization, in the hope of building democratic legitimacy at home. Or we can globalize democracy, at the cost of national sovereignty” (Rodrik, 2011: 200). Amongst these three, we believe that the first option is the one that adjusts the better in the political context of *Future Home of the Living God* for several reasons¹⁷.

¹⁷ To know more about how each of the three options are developed, see chapter 9 in *The Globalization Paradox*, pages 184-206. In that chapter there are explanations as well as examples for each alternative, taken from real cases happening in the present day or in the past.

One of these reasons is the obscurantism that seems to go along the government in control of society in the story. From what Rodrik suggests, we know huge multinationals operate at a global level exerting pressure on governments in order to facilitate their business operations and make as much profit as possible. We know that their influence goes from decisions in labor standards to regulations in corporate taxes and even industrial policies *à la carte*, all of these factors directly making a huge impact on the very concept of democracy¹⁸. This is, however, carried out in the shade, away from the public opinion. Many states believe this option to be the best one: it guarantees a competitive economy on the short run, but it also tends to create tension between the population and the government. The US has long belonged to the group of countries that bet high for such a model, which is the reason why we believe these type of policies could be at the base of Erdrich's story development¹⁹.

When economic policies are not regulated by the nations and they depend on the fluctuations of the highly unstable global markets, the outcomes are just as unpredictable in economic terms as they are in relation to the impact of the policies they adjust to regarding human rights and environmental sustainability. Diane Elson, a British economist, sociologist and gender and development social scientist, wrote in *Why Women Will Save the Planet* (2018) an essay called "Women's Empowerment and Environmental Sustainability in the Contexts of UN Agreements" where she declared:

¹⁸ Also in chapter 9, Dani Rodrik explains shows in detail how tying the economy to the principles of globalization affected Argentina in the 90's, which constitutes a paradigmatic example of a developing country which embraced global market rules which finally led to a bigger economic, political and social crisis. In chapter 5, we can find the effects of financial globalization in economic terms, where several cases are analyzed from a historicist point of view and where it is stated that "periods of high international capital mobility have repeatedly produced international banking crisis, not only famously as they did in the 1990s, but historically", from page 89 to 111.

¹⁹ Example of this can be found almost anywhere in the planet since globalization started. During the process workers see their rights diminished, their salaries cut down, public services are sold to private companies. The kind of politics emerging from these policies definitely places companies' interests before society and the environment, as well as they allow the intervention of the economic powers not only in the country which decides to implement them, but also in the less developed countries, through international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), which was originally created by the most developed countries in the world to safeguard their interests in 1995, or through mechanisms such as outsourcing, thanks to which multinationals are allowed to move their production settlements there where they will meet less restrictions in terms of labor rights or environmental control.

There is evidence that strongly suggests that the underlying consequences of unsustainability and gender inequality are deeply intertwined and rooted in profit-driven economic processes. These involve market liberalisation, productive and financial activity geared to short-term profits; unrestrained material consumption; unparalleled levels of militarism; privatisation of public goods and services and reduction of the capacities of governments to regulate and redistribute. (Elson, 2018: 85)

This could be easily demonstrated by our societies' stubbornness to continue using fossil fuels instead of leading a transition to green energy, which we know it has neither happened in the book's story, for there is no sign in the North American society that Erdrich depicts of having promoted major changes towards green and sustainable energy²⁰. Furthermore, there is the issue of food all along the story, processed aliments and even genetically modified animals and seeds that we know conform one of the biggest industries of our time. There are several mentions to their productions, although it is not always addressed directly as in, for example, the "Antibiotic-free milk" (Erdrich, 2017: 32) that Cedar mentions in Part I, as if letting the reader know it is not common, otherwise there would be no need to be specific about it. Still another allusion to these kind of practices can be found in Part I after Hiro's visit, when Cedar makes herself some lunch, she remembers that "I thought this might be the last we'd see of corn - a technology-dependent crop, but as it is genetically enhanced, its whole physical backslide might be very much off" (Erdrich 2017: 98). As it appears, this type of industry continues to be an important one in the food supply sector²¹, which reinforces our argument that Erdrich's dystopia must be based upon an eco-fascist regime.

²⁰ As a matter of fact, the US is expected to become one of the main energy exporters in the world according to a report released by the US Energy Information Administration (<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=38152>), thanks to hydraulic fracturing (fracking), through which the extraction of crude oil and natural gas has reached another level in the country. However, this new technique is controversial, as it has been banned in several countries in the European Union such as France, Ireland or Germany, for it is considered to be potentially harmful, not only for the environment, but also to persons (although, at a very localized level (<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/12/fracking-linked-low-weight-babies>)).

²¹ As National Geographic journalist Alejandra Borunda reports in her article "Methane Explained", "there are 1.4 billion cattle in the world, [...] together with other grazing animals, they contribute about 40 percent of the annual methane budget". Methane, she explains, is a greenhouse gas that can be found in the atmosphere in low levels compared to other gases, but whose concentration in the air has doubled since the Industrial Revolution

Finally, as in many other dystopias, governments tend to be one of the main factors for a society to go wrong. An element in common tends to be militarism. Under a capitalist system it is hard to know whether militarized squads come before or after the privatisation of public goods and services²².

Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* is no exception to militarism control. We have already discussed about the Unborn Protection Society, which is a perfect example of a militarized police working for the interests of the government. But there still is another element in the story that remains shadowed by the authoress narrative style, unveiled as the plot advances. It is the program "Mother"²³. The program seems to be conducted by a woman who performs as a kind of guru in charge of spreading the government's message amongst the population, specially directed to pregnant women, but it seems to be also responsible for military actions, as they seem to be in control of the UPS and as it is shown when they break into Sweetie's house where they are looking for Cedar in Part III - although we are never

began and is considered to specially contribute to global warming, despite its low quantity in the air compared to other greenhouse gases, for its "chemical shape is remarkably effective at trapping heat", making it a serious threat and an issue to be taken into account were we to head towards a more sustainable way of life. Regarding animal farming energy costs, we also need to take into account the necessary infrastructure to hold the macro farms where these animals are produced - most of the times under more than inadequate circumstances - in terms of transport or the food they consume, which many times also comes from macro fields that big producer companies use, causing deforestation as more land is required the more demand for meat and dairy there is. The whole article can be found at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/methane/>

²² It seems rather convenient that in order to keep privatized goods or services there needs to previously be a police apparatus that will guarantee the safety of those investments. However, these mechanisms of control seem to be intrinsic to the system and they tend to be legitimized by it, although it is widely accepted that societies need them in order not to turn into chaos. But militarized groups within a state are not independent from it, hence, if we assume that multinational companies are somehow in control of politics up to some degree, it seems plausible that these groups will care for their investors welfare, protecting their interests before those of the people's. So arguably, militarized organizations come before a dystopia is completely displayed, but the more a society is turning into a dystopia, the easier it becomes to identify who they are working for. This cooperation between armed forces, companies and governments does not come unfamiliar to our societies, the recent mass social movement in the US after George Floyd's death is a good example of this. While protesters are taking the streets, Trump's government is trying to spread the message that systemic racism does not exist at an institutional level, a discourses that aims to protect the privileges of a prominently wealthy white-male group of politicians and businessmen that would see their benefits cut down were the US to become a more egalitarian society.

²³ Ironically, a program which is specifically developed to oppress and kidnap pregnant women goes by the name of "Mother", a fact which constitutes another very common element in dystopian novels, where governments tend to manipulate the language so that their actions will be legitimized in the eyes of legality or ethics. The program "Mother" is one of the most paradigmatic examples of the patriarchal society that Erdrich depicts, which no longer hides its misogyny behind politically correct actions or speeches.

exactly sure that it was maybe just Cedar hallucinating. But it is the technology at their disposal and their capacity to take over strategic locations what catches our attention, regarding the appropriation of public goods and services. Their espionage and surveillance techniques go from their ability to break into any computer system to almost undetectable micro drones with the shape of an ear which they use to invade the intimacy of the population and to track down hostiles and fugitives. As the story reveals, “people just dumped the phones, the screens” (Erdrich, 2017: 222), aware that they can be found by these means, the regular postmail becoming “the only reliable source of long-distance communication (Erdrich, 2017: 94) and “clandestine radio broadcasts” (Erdrich, 2017: 89) being an alternative source of information.

Furthermore, hospitals are not only privatized as they usually are in the US, but they are also under the strict control of the government and the program “Mother”, which conducts experiments and imprisons pregnant women there, so they can be monitored and their babies taken away. The health care system, which has long been a privilege for most of the people in the US, goes way beyond that and turns from a constitutional right to another means of surveillance and control, where their main concern is to keep those women able to give birth to healthy and “normal” children under observation, and to make disappear those who are not. Hospitals become murderous places where life is threatened instead of taken care of, they are the opposite of what they used to be. Society has turned specially against women who, from an ecofeminist perspective, are one of the main bastions in the fight against environmental destruction and social justice. In other words, turning against women is also turning against the natural world and civilization itself.

4.1. Ecofeminism Activism as a Means to New Models of Society

In the world of *Future Home of the Living God* social activism seems to come mainly from men at first sight. It is Phil who engages with other parishioners to shelter women in the church basement at the beginning of the novel, and Eddy who conducts the Native American resistance and the protection of the land against the government. But as in many other cases in the book, this is revealed to be just a mirage, as they both fail to protect Cedar and her baby²⁴. On the other hand, women's actions and activism are disguised within the plot, almost going unidentified as a form of resistance. They seem just another necessary element for the plot to be continued the way it does, almost as a natural consequence given the circumstances. It could be argued that their actions are invisibilized by Erdrich's narrative on purpose, just as women have been systematically invisibilized by society. Ironically, without them there would be no story, just as there would be no human history itself without women. Their resistance is the story of this book. It seems that Erdrich was perhaps intending to invisibilize the importance of women agency in the book as a means of protest against their being left aside by society, making this issue visible by conducting her narrative just the way the patriarchal system would. She makes their stories visible by depicting their invisibility. Readers are trapped into this contradictory spider-web, becoming accomplices of the dominant narratives of oppression, by being unaware that the fact that Cedar is writing a chronicle on a secret diary is just a reflection of that invisibility that women are forced into almost as a cultural pattern²⁵.

²⁴ Phil ends up captured and tortured, and he unwillingly leads the UPS to Cedar's house, whereas Eddy seems to be starting a war, him becoming the leader of the resistance which aims to take back Native Americans' former lands. Cedar is kidnapped again under his watch, even though he was not physically there, while she was visiting the statue of Kateri. Both of them seem to be closer to a manly way of dealing with problems and their activism is pretty much independent from the story, it does not make a big impact on it.

²⁵ But the fact that women activism is most of the times hidden or interpreted as a natural outcome resulting from the authoress own narrative in the book, does not mean it is nonexistent at all. Interestingly, their actions reveal themselves to be coordinated, cooperative, non-violent - although we acknowledge some violent episodes into which the female protagonists are forced - and concerned with gender, social class, race and the natural environment.

In order to analyze women agency in *Future Home of the Living God* we believe that an ecofeminist perspective could be useful as a means to further this research, providing a broader lens for a literary analysis of this novel, which will be able to identify and develop several problematic aspects from a singular perspective. Ecofeminism could be defined as a social movement which sets a dialogue in terms of equality between feminism and ecology, which are two independent discourses. When both ways of interpreting and understanding the two issues they deal with interact with each other, they provide with a wider perspective on how to address their problematics and many other issues that come hand in hand with them. The Spanish researcher Irene Sanz Alonso places ecofeminism as a philosophical and political movement which “not only highlight[s] the absence of [a human] bond with the natural world, but also emphasize[s] how the patterns of domination to which humans have subjected the environment run in parallel with those suffered by human and nonhuman creatures labeled the *other*: women, ethnic minorities, children, nonhuman animals, and nature, among others.” (Sanz, 2018: 1). These patterns of domination, consisting in othering subjects non-belonging to a particular group considered superior, emerge from the conceptualization and interpretation on how the world is organized, perpetuated by the patriarchy and the economic models that sustain it. In other words, feminism, environmentalism, working class movements, or anti-racial movements - only to name some of them - are disregarded, undermined and repressed by the the same mechanisms of power which favor a very specific kind of individual over the others. In sum, what an ecofeminist perspective suggests is a coordinated fight driven by the oppressed in terms of equality, finding common ground and inclusive strategies from where the possibility of working together could reach productive outcomes for all the parts involved.

There are many examples of ecofeminist activism all across the world that show the connection between feminists and environmentalists fights. In an interview gathered in *Why*

Women will Save the Planet (2018) called “The close ties between social and environmental justice”, Karin Nansen asserts that “the sexual division of labour also cuts across class” (Nansen, 2018: 169) which in many cases comes as a result of the “privatization of nature”. Although she provides with a couple of examples, we will take a closer look to Gotelind Alber’s “Engendering Urban Climate Policy”, also available in *Why Women will Save the Planet*. There, she suggests that inequalities as well as injustices tend to be aggravated by the effects of climate change and even the policies the governments use to mitigate it. For example, there is the issue about public transportation in some areas where it tends to be not so well developed. According to Alber, as “women have less access to motorised means of transport, and consequently they walk more, and over longer distances, and are more dependent on public transportation services than men [...] its lack of safety [...] massively constrains women's mobility” (Alber, 2018: 168), which only adds more weight to the problem. As women have less mobility, they have less chance to work outside their residential areas, leaving them the traditionally assigned and often unpaid jobs of household and caregiving, “which should be shared between men, women and the state” (Alber, 2018: 168). These circumstances reinforce Nansen first statement that sexual division of labour also has an impact on class, for lower class individuals who live in poorer areas are less well communicated. By not enhancing public transportation in those areas, policies contribute to worsening women’s situation as well as to the pollution of the urban environments.

Lyla Mehta and Melissa Leach address the matter very straightforwardly in their essay “Why do gender equality and sustainability go hand in hand?” - also to be found in *Why Women will Save the Planet*. They affirm that “environment and sustainable development are not gender neutral. They are shaped by and shape gender relations which in turn determine environmental outcomes” (Mehta and Leach, 2018: 195) for they are “political”. Even the so-called green economies appear to be gender biased in capitalistic

terms, as mitigation policies are contemplated from the perspective of economic growth “reshaped in green directions” through technological enhancement²⁶, neglecting questions of justice and social values, and following the old same patterns with a “technocentric and economistic focus”, by which women and lower classes are always left in oblivion. According to Mehta and Leach, “in the name of environmental protection, local women and men have sometimes been dispossessed from their lands, forests and water resources” (Mehta and Leach, 2018: 205), which is exactly the same procedures that some governments, such as the North-American, followed in order to expropriate the land from Native-American communities where important natural resources were located.

These are some of the issues that ecofeminists denounce by showing how environmental policies impact directly on gender and women’s situation, as well as affecting lower classes, minorities, and contributing to racial segregation. In the opinion of Mehta and Leach, social movements as well as politics need to engage with “building more equitable gender relations that support the human rights” (Mehta and Leach, 2018: 206) and anti-patriarchal, anti-racist and anti-capitalist economic models based on solidarity and cooperation, prioritizing the sustainability of human life.

4.2. Is Cedar an Ecofeminist activist? Cooperation and Protection of the Material Bases for Life

In order to address the question about the possibility of Cedar becoming an ecofeminist activist of some sort in *Future Home of the Living God*, we need to explore the authoress link with Native American communities, for the influence of her cultural

²⁶ It is estimated that American green economy based on new technology - the transition to green energy and zero emissions - was worth \$1.4 trillion in 2019 according to IndustryWeek, an online journal, in this article: <https://www.industryweek.com/the-economy/article/22028401/americas-green-economy-is-now-worth-14-trillion> . More information on the topic is available on *Estimating the scale of the US green economy within the global context* by Lucien Georgeson and Mark Maslin, published in 2019.

background as well as her own personal experiences seem to be reflected in her writings, as being a Native American influences Cedar herself. Both of their ties to Native American culture approach them to ecofeminist ways of interpreting the world, even if it was not intended by any of them²⁷.

Karen Louise Erdrich is a well-known North American writer with Native-American origins, her mother being an Ojibwe and her father being the son of German immigrants. This is one of the main aspects that the authoress shares with Cedar, whose mother is also an Ojibwe Native-American and whose father was raised in the Western values. Erdrich's literature focuses for the most part on representing many different aspects of the Native-American life after colonialism through her Native-American characters, using her narratives to be critical with how the North American society has long treated her people. In the opinion of Seema Kurup "[Erdrich's] authentic voice seems to come forth more naturally from her Ojibwe roots" (Kurup, 2016: 2) her literature becoming "a literature of the land, of home, where identity is clearly constructed out of the climate, the seasons, the natural world, and Ojibwe tribal culture and tradition" (Kurup, 2016: 6). There are many of these elements to be found in *Future Home of the Living God* through Mary Potts' family, which serve us to identify Cedar as a non-essentialist ecofeminist. Even though she actually wishes for the bond with nature her origins presuppose in Native-Americans to be of some sort of help for her child not to die in the process of giving birth, her hopes do not arise from the ecofeminist assumption that she has closer ties with nature for being a woman²⁸, but from her cultural background.

²⁷ This perspective will also allow us to cast aside a vision from which the protagonist could be seen closer to an essentialist ecofeminism, whose premises are based on the assumption of a closer relationship between women and nature than men would have, even if at first sight one could see this angle as a more fitting, even appropriate one. This is a more mystical vision which does not go in accordance with the purpose of this paper, although we acknowledge that ecofeminism does have to do more with the feminine than with the masculine from a sociological perspective unconcerned with the idea of a feminine special bond with nature.

²⁸ In her article "What's In A Name? In Defense of Ecofeminism (not Ecological Feminisms, Feminist Ecology, or Gender and the Environment)", Chaone Mallory states that essentialist ecofeminist writers such as Judith

Nevertheless, it is worth taking into consideration some questions that the ecofeminist Chaone Mallory makes regarding what some may see as essentialism, a discourse which has been disregarded by scholars but that, according to her, has not been properly addressed:

If one says that “women” are like “nature” in that both provide a source of life and nurturance that become exploited, degraded, unacknowledged, and oppressed by white supremacist anthropocentric capitalist patriarchy and asks for a reclaiming of traditional “female” or “feminine” values and practices in order to protect women, natural beings and entities, and dependent Others, is this really insufficiently critical of the ways that this is a historically and socially-constructed connection? And to what degree does other feminists’ rejection of “motherhood environmentalism” [-considered essentialist -] serve to unwittingly devalue caregiving work and the ethics and epistemologies that arise from it? (Mallory, 2018: 26)

It is through the point Mallory makes here that we might consequently be closer to finding ecofeminist attitudes in Cedar’s behaviour. What the scholar is trying to reflect about by questioning why comparing women and nature usually comes as an essentialist argument, considered from the fact that both are sources of life, is the privileges that some trends, following the Enlightenment tail²⁹, seem to enjoy over others without even accounting for any kind of valid arguments that may emerge from the currents they leave aside from the debate despite their potential possibilities to enrich the discussion. As a matter of fact, and as we have mentioned before, Cedar acknowledges at some point her being at the same level as nature itself. The difference here is that she does not fight it, her awareness of the situation comes for her in terms of equality with nature, but not as a resignation or as if it were a loss for her as human individual: “I have this feeling, as I carry this baby into life, that things

Plant, Irene Diamond or Gloria Orenstein, who were renowned during earlier ecofeminism stages, believe that “the earth can be ‘healed’ through a reclaiming of purported ancient value systems, religions, rituals and practices that find liberatory power in the historic, symbolic, and material associations between women and nature” which is a vision that has contributed to a scholarly marginalization: “the claim that women possess a “special” connection to nature that men do not, or that women have privileged epistemological access to an animate, enchanted, maternal earth, or that women’s reproductive bodies possess an ontological continuity with nature that surpasses that of men’s, is precisely what has periodically exiled ecofeminism from “serious” scholarly attention and analysis” (Mallory, 2018: 19). This is what she calls “policing ecofeminism”.

²⁹ Different non-essentialist ecofeminist and some ecology trends such as social ecology or social ecofeminism maintain that essentialism needs to be dismissed for its irrationalism and its lack of scientific arguments. However, these currents of thought which are very critical with essentialist ecofeminism, in many cases openly draw from the Enlightenment rationality, responsible for and at the base of the current epistemologies that support the same system they want to be critical with, that is the patriarchy.

aren't really going backward. Things aren't really falling apart. All that is happening, even the purest chaos, physical and personal, even political, is basically alright" (Erdrich, 2017: 208). She embraces the nature of the circumstances because she has come to terms with them, her only preoccupation being to be able to deliver her baby safely and the welfare of her family.

Chaone Mallory puts her finger on the open sore when she claims that ecofeminist theories that seem to have inherited some essentialist influences are systematically paid no attention by the scholars because, in reality, they do not wish to be equals with nature, for that egalisation would also come with a loss in terms of privilege over our natural environment and non-human creatures:

"There remains a strong discomfort among most humans, including humans that happen to be feminist philosophers, in genuinely acknowledging the ontological, biological, ethical, and evolutionary interconnections between humans and non-humans. I maintain that this discomfort has its source in the same modernist, dualistic, oppressive discourses that have been shown to be oppressive to women, people of color, the non-heteronormative, (etc.), and nature." (Mallory, 2018: 27)

Cedar accepts the "evolutionary interconnections" between her and nature, which places her in the position of what could potentially become an ecofeminist. She breaks the dualistic wheel which organizes the world into pairs that privileges men over women, the self over the other, or culture over nature, she delays her world as she moves on in the story, she comes to understand that she will not succeed in taking care of her, her family and her baby by remaining monitorized by cultural boundaries which set hierarchies so that the dominant discourse can continue to be so. She begins to move through cooperation networks and she defies the order that has been established. One great example of this is her rejection to perpetuate the system which has brought civilisation to face the life-threatening situation that they are in, when, by the end of Part III, she turns down Phil's offer to run away with a hypothetical healthy and "normal" baby awaiting for the world to topple. She is offered the best prospect than she will ever be offered but, instead, she leaves Phil before returning to

the same old state of affairs that led them where they are, even when she is aware that she might be putting herself at risk once more³⁰.

Cedar is very well headed in the opposite direction than Phil is, which reveals herself to be anti-capitalist and anti-hierarchical in essence. She does not only stand up for a new order by refusing Phil's wish to become somebody powerful, besides she has already been taking active part of cooperative liberation movements and networks that operate in clandestinity. These movements are characterized to be run by women activists, amongst whom her adoptive mother Sera, the nurse called Jessie - who reveals to be an undercover obstetrician-gynecologist who tries to get women out of the hospital -, and even Tia and Cedar herself play important roles. Their actions revolve around one main and characteristic goals for the matter of this section: the preservation of the material bases for life. The preservation of women, life-givers, care-givers. Their activism goes pretty much unnoticed all along the story, but they represent the most powerful asset for hope and a social revolution. Their fight and the goals they pursue run in parallel with those which feminism and ecology devote themselves to, in defiance against the old tyrannic ways of constructing meaning and, therefore, society. They aim to build a new epistemology at the base of equality, dignity and integrity, which necessarily includes environmental sustainability, for nature and women are the most important representatives of what makes human life possible.

³⁰ Phil's words are carriers of the opposite message that Cedar has been innerly interiorizing: "You have a treasure, Cedar, if our baby is normal. We would be in charge of things. Rich. Super rich! [...] The sky's the limit for us." to which she replies with sarcasm: "We could seize power and found a dynasty" (Erdrich, 2017: 247). Her negative response, after which she abandons Phil, represents perfectly what she is at odds with. She is not interesting in illegitimate power, for she understands that it is exactly the same dynamic that has devastated the world. A dynasty can only exist at the base of hierarchies and inequalities, the same processes which put her and many other women in the hospital under surveillance, a mechanism that kidnaps, tortures and murders people, specially those considered inferior by the system it sustains.

5. Conclusion

Our notion of the world is determined by our beliefs. Two opposite positions seem to be predominantly responsible for what is to become of civilizations nowadays, especially in the Northern hemisphere: those who deny the existence of the Anthropocene, climate change and social inequalities in defense of globalization, liberalism and patriarchal dominance, and those who fight them from the other extreme, from the position of the oppressed, concerned about the impact of human activity on a planet which is considered to be at the edge of an ecological collapse and a global social crisis.

Dystopias are a reflection of a reality which threatens to catch up with us sooner than later. The ambience they depict appears to be more and more familiar to the reader as years go by and the stillness of the governments turns into violence towards those who defy the *status quo*. Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* denounces this situation that must no longer be ignored. The authoress' choice to write a dystopian novel does not seem a coincidence, rather it would appear to be the product of causality. In the era of fake news, systemic institutional racism and misogyny, the return to old-fashioned religious values, the adoration for money, and the tribute to a self-conferred superiority of white-masculine standards led by the Trumps, Bolsonaros, Johnsons or Añezes around the world, dissident voices rise up in rejection of their narrow and exclusive policies that find shelter under the word of God.

Ironically, their presidential terms have coincided in time with one of the most severe sanitary crises that our civilization has gone through. The Covid-19 has shaken the very foundations of Western systems, weakening them and revealing their priorities and sympathies for those who they really aim to protect. During this pandemic, the world has witnessed an unprecedented situation that many are willing to ignore, for it challenges one of the most widespread clichés about the human race: many of the countries where there is a

woman in charge of the government appear to be amongst the most efficient in containing the virus³¹. The world is switching patterns, academia is beginning to realize the changes that need to be done, the people are awakening and awareness is on the rise, but the dominant mechanisms of power resist to be overthrown.

Future Home of the Living God gathers many contemporary concerns; it represents one of the many possible outcomes to the numerous crisis our society is undergoing. Through the novel we can read about the consequences of unrestrained technological advances which affect human as well as natural life, through very complex mechanisms that, in turn, appear to perfectly plausible to the reader. Our analysis shows a significant interconnection between our dependence on technology and economic growth, the impact of it on the ecosystems and the climate, and social injustice, pictured by Cedar's story and Erdrich's fascinating narrative.

Literature, criticism, and culture can be tools to contribute mitigating the effects derived from the Anthropocene and rising awareness about the social changes we need to achieve if we are to survive as species. But it will be necessary to readapt ourselves to a more stable, decomplexified and eco-friendly lifestyles. One might say we have the tools to reach such goals, for technology could play the opposite role it has been playing for almost the last two centuries. It could be a powerful asset. But technology means nothing if we lack the mindset to use it responsibly, and one of the most effective ways of making people responsible of their acts is through culture, the kind of culture that stimulates critical thinking

³¹ Out of 193 countries in the world, only 10 are currently run by women. Amongst them, during the Coronavirus crises, Angela Merkel (Germany), Silveria Jacobs (Sint Maarten), Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand), Mette Frederiksen (Denmark), Katrín Jakobsdóttir (Iceland), or Sanna Marin (Finland), to name a few, have characterized themselves for having managed the crisis "firmly" and "with aplomb", as Jon Henley and Eleanor Ainge Roy, journalists in *The Guardian*, point out. Measures were taken quickly and public services were provided for the population. Also, innovative steps were taken in order to inform the population about the dangers of the Covid-19, as for example in the case of Marin, who contacted popular influencers in order to make the youngest public concerned. Their messages have been clear and convincing, as well as their actions. They have mobilized resources, they have been advised by scientists as in Germany, where pharmaceutical companies and universities were consulted. Not only have they been diligent in their moves, but they have been solidary as well, as Ardern's case proves, who cut her salary and her the rest of her government by a 20%. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/why-do-female-leaders-seem-to-be-more-successful-at-managing-the-coronavirus-crisis>

and empowers people so they will be able to identify injustice and fight it. In the end, that is what dystopias are all about: they represent the consequences of not doing something, of leaving ourselves behind for the benefit and privilege of some. Do we want to live in one?

5.1. Further Research

There are some extra argumentation lines that this paper would have liked to follow and that, due to the words limitation, it has been not possible to take on. We believe that all of them could add valuable information to the sections that have actually been developed. We are going to mention some here.

When it comes to the Anthropocene, the concept is currently being discussed worldwide by geologists and scientists, and we believe that a more profound research on the science behind it might have been useful for the purpose of this paper, for *Future Home of the Living God* seems to faithfully reflect the consequences emerging from the lifestyles which the burning of fossil fuels at a global scale have brought, which represents one of the main causes for a switche in geoloical terms. In connection with this point, we believe that exploring in more depth the connection between an ecocritic reading of the novel and its Native American background, alluding to the impact that Western civilizations and globalization has had on Native American communities, as it happened before with Old European civilizations, also matriarchal societies which worshiped the Great Goddess, exterminated in the hands of patriarchal societies coming from the East.

Finally, another possible line of research might have taken the parallelism between ecofeminist movements and those which characterize the fights against race discrimination and environmental destruction in a similar way that feminism identifies with environmentalism. These discourses are on the rise, specially after the events that took place in the US after George Floyd's death, another line of argumentation that could enrich the

final sections of this paper, for their vindications seem to align with the purpose of finding broader perspectives from which tackling the problems that are presented in this work.

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

Erdrich, Louise. *Future Home of the Living God*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2017

Secondary Sources:

Alber, Gotelind. "Engendering Urban Climate Policy." In Nicola Baird (ed.), *Why Women will Save the Planet*. London: Friends of the Earth Trust Ltd and C40 Cities, 2018. 156-167.

Allenby, Braden R., and Sarewitz, Daniel. *The Techno-Human Condition*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011.

Angus, Ian. *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016.

Borunda, Alejandra. "Methane, explained". *National Geographic*. 23 January 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/methane/> (28/05/2020)

Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2015.

Djanaguiraman, Maduraimuthu and Prasad, Vara. "High Temperature Stress." In Michael Jackson, Brian Ford-Lloyd, and Martin Parry (ed.), *Plant Genetic Resources and Climate Change*. Wallingford, U.K: Hardback, 2013: 201-215.

Dunne, Emma. "Rainforest collapse in prehistoric times changed the course of evolution." *The Conversation*. 07 February 2018, <https://theconversation.com/rainforest-collapse-in-prehistoric-times-changed-the-course-of-evolution-91289> (14/05/2020)

Elson, Diane. "Women's Empowerment and Environmental Sustainability in the Contexts of UN Agreements." In Nicola Baird (ed.), *Why Women will Save the Planet*. London: Friends of the Earth Trust Ltd and C40 Cities, 2018. 73-87.

Gibbons, Ann. "Fracking linked to low-weight babies." *Science*. 13 December 2017, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/12/fracking-linked-low-weight-babies> (11/06/2020).

Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1991:149-181.

Harper, Lawrence V. "Pathways by which the Interplay of Organismic and Environmental Factors Lead to Phenotypic Variation within and across Generations." *Advances in Child Development and Behavior. Embodiment and Epigenesis: Theoretical and Methodological Issues in Understanding the Role of Biology within the Relational Developmental System*. Volume 44. Issue 12, 2013: 325-348.

Henley, Jon, and Ainge Roy, Eleanor. "Are female leaders more successful at managing the coronavirus crisis?" *The Guardian*. 25 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/why-do-female-leaders-seem-to-be-more-successful-at-managing-the-coronavirus-crisis> (14/06/2020).

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ebook: Global Grey, 2019 (1651).

Kurup, Seema. *Understanding Louise Erdrich*. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2016.

Lovejoy, Thomas E., and Nobre, Carlos. "Amazon Tipping Point." *Science Advances*. Volume 4. Issue 2, 02 February 2018, <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/2/eaat2340> (14/05/2020).

Mallory, Chaone. "What's In A Name? In Defense of Ecofeminism (not Ecological Feminisms, Feminist Ecology, or Gender and the Environment)." *Ethics & The Environment*, Volume 23. Issue 2, 2018: 11-35.

Metha, Lyla & Leach, Melissa. "Why do gender equality and sustainability go hand in hand?" In Nicola Baird (ed.), *Why Women will Save the Planet*. London: Friends of the Earth Trust Ltd and C40 Cities, 2018. 168-183.

Nansen, Karin. "The close ties between social and environmental justice." In Nicola Baird (ed.), *Why Women will Save the Planet*. London: Friends of the Earth Trust Ltd and C40 Cities, 2018. 146-155.

Pachauri, Rajendra K., et. al. *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report*. Geneva: IPCC, 2014.

Rodrik, Dani. *The Globalisation Paradox*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Roston, Eric. "America's 'Green Economy' Is Now Worth \$1.4 Trillion." *Bloomberg*. 15 October 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-15/america-s-green-economy-is-now-worth-1-4-trillion> (02/06/2020)

Sahney, Sarda, Benton, Michael J., and Falcon-Lang, Howard J. "Rainforest collapse triggered Carboniferous tetrapod diversification in Euramerica." *Geology*. Volume 28. Issue 12, 2010: 1079-1082.

Sanz Alonso, Irene. "Ecofeminism and Science Fiction: Human-Alien Literary Intersections." *Women's Studies*. Volume 47. Issue, 2, 2018: 216-231.

The Keeling Curve, Scripps Institution of Oceanography. UC San Diego. https://scripps.ucsd.edu/programs/keelingcurve/?fbclid=IwAR26fm0646dau4jLgShyic2cOlZd-I0kcqrLy15bj3Bma9RgmG_iTZTF2QY (16/05/2020).

UPS. <https://www.ups.com/us/en/help-center/contact.page> (14/05/2020).

What is epigenetics?, Genetics Home Reference, <https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/primer/howgeneswork/epigenome> (18/05/2020).

Yen, Terry. "The United States is expected to export more energy than it imports by 2020." *U.S. Energy Information Administration*. 29 January 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=38152> (11/06/2020).